

MENTORING AND TUTORING IN THE STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the literature on student support services, explains the need for such services in Higher Education and emphasizes the importance of mentoring and tutoring in the context of academic advising. The paper aims to present the main conceptual approaches in the field of student support services and international examples related to mentoring and tutoring. In addition, we discuss the results of a small-scale experiment conducted in order to test the availability and capability for building a relationship of educational partnership. Such a partnership appears as an essential element of the referred services in the context of promoting a student-centered education as the prerequisite of quality in higher education.

KEYWORDS Higher Education, Student Support Services, Academic Advising, Mentoring, Tutoring

1. Introduction

Within this general framework, TRIO programs have certain characteristics that make them effective, especially related to services that complement the students' experience by integrating issues of leadership, civic engagement, and personal/academic development in order to support their shaping as lifelong learners and leaders. Some of the resources offered by TRIO programs and other such supporting programs include basic skills training, tutoring services, personal/career counseling, and mentoring, to name a few. However, each supporting program must tailor to the specific needs of the university.

The current concerns for achieving quality in Higher Education (HE) explicitly relate to a student-centered education. In such a modern education system, Student Support Services (SSS) must play a central role for enhancing the student participation in the university.

The literature supports the fact that SSS are very successful in helping students "navigate" in the university, especially those students who are considered underrepresented and/or underprivileged.

The need and importance of SSS are visible in some statistics related to supporting SSS programs. Over the years, such programs were expanded, becoming nationally known for the assistance they provide to the targeted population and its specific results (Loggins et al., 2009). It is the case of TRIO support service program, established in 1968 with the intention of increasing college retention rates for first-generation students, students from low-income families, and/or students with disabilities (Council for Opportunity in Education [COE], 2008). As concerns the results, Walsh stated four years ago "More than

80% of TRIO students persist in their academic goals each year. The graduation rates, transfer rates, and GPA (Grade Point Average) levels of these students far exceed those of similar students who are not enrolled in the TRIO program as documented in annual program evaluations" (Walsh, 2000, p. 12).

In general, the term of SSS refer to a range of services covering different intervention areas (Fig. 1) and different stages in the student life cycle (Figure 2).

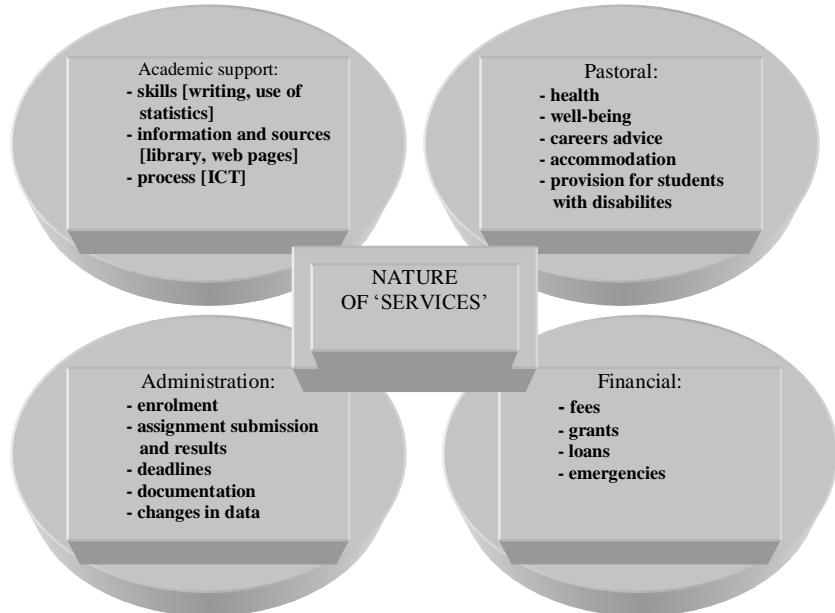


Figure 1

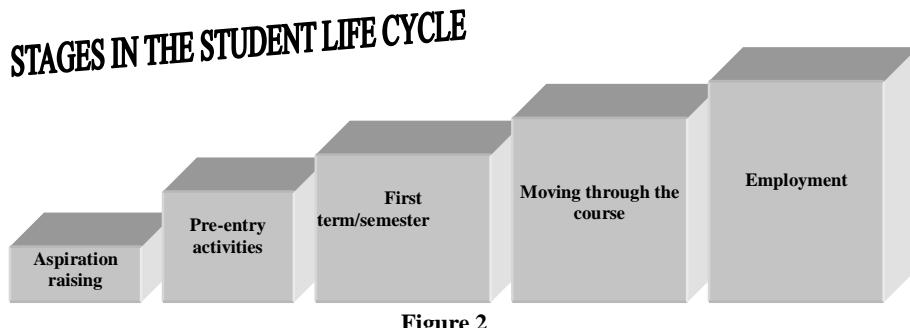


Figure 2

2. Academic advising

One essential way to enhance the student participation in the university is to design programs that acknowledge their individual needs.

Program planning focused on the institution's mission and students' needs can result in a dynamic advising system having the capacity to adapt to internal and external change.

Obviously, the academic advising practices vary from institution to institution, making it difficult setting of blanket recommendations that guarantee positive results of specific decisions within each university. However, the many cases presented in the international literature can provide some relevant aspects that should be consider when deciding. Thus, there may be many ways in which academic advising contributes to students' success by increasing their opportunities to interact with a faculty/professional adviser, to feel more connected with the university, to clarify how to make course options, eventually serving as an educational and/or vocational checkup. Precisely because the Romanian universities are rather at the beginning of this long way towards a good academic advising, we consider important to point out some shortcomings revealed by the international experience. So, let's learn from the others and don't repeat the same mistakes.

Firstly, according to Tinto (as cited in Dyer & Myers, 2005, p. 284), "more students leave college before completing a degree than stay and graduate" and a relevant aspect in this low retention rate is consider to be students' dissatisfaction with the institution. In its turn, this dissatisfaction frequently resides in academic advising related issues (Corts et al., 2000). These include mainly the advisers' lack of time to pay attention to individual students, the poor quality of advising actions, and the perceived coddling of students (Corts et al, 2000).

Secondly, frequent mistakes seem to appear also in relation with other causes as follows:

- The logistical issues such as those of staffing can affect the possibility of ensuring a good academic advising, especially in the large universities. If there are too many students assigned to a single adviser, the probability of working in an impersonal manner with short advising sessions is greater. This will leave a negative impression on the student, not only relative to the adviser but also the institution as a whole (as represented by the adviser).
- If the advising session is rather formal than constructive (e.g. by its reducing to a simply routine action with final target of signing in a semester schedule), then the student can consider that the meeting was a waste of time. Furthermore, the best students (who can handle themselves the issues related to the course schedules) could see a requirement to meet with an adviser as being pointless.

The university must ask: "What means advising our students for our campus?" The answer can be an advisory system based on shared responsibility, which means:

1. To view advising as a wide institutional system centered on students' involvement and positive university outcomes.
2. To promote concepts of shared responsibility for both the students and the university.
3. To build the advising relationship starting with an awareness of the goal (by setting the general objective of academic advising), and continuing with an awareness of the details (by breaking down the general objective into specific objectives according to the university vision and individual needs of the students).
4. To plan for success by involving all participants in an ongoing strategic effort to develop the advising centered on a meaningful mission.
5. To evaluate the overall program and individual contributions (the results can provide a direction for change).
6. To collaborate for strengthen the advising relationship, since the mutual shared objectives, efforts and benefits can stimulate students to contact many members of the university community, thus providing more answers to questions that arise in academic planning.

3. Tutoring and mentoring by students

On the one hand, tutoring and especially peer tutoring often relate to a common view that, for tutors, it is the so-called “learning by teaching”. This view reflects the old saying “to teach is to learn twice”. However, by its nature, the act of tutoring involves further cognitive challenges, particularly with respect to simplification, clarification and exemplification.

On the other hand, mentoring as a learning and development tool includes sharing experience, offering encouragement, insight through reflection and mutual learning. Many conceptual approaches of mentoring were in relation with areas such as career development, management/leadership, study skills, teaching and learning. After the year 2000 the concept becomes more and more explicitly addressed as: (1) support for education; (2) support for day-to-day living; (3) support in the workplace.

For a better understanding of the current meanings of the two concepts may be useful a synthesis of the main differences between tutoring and mentoring as presented in the Figure 3.

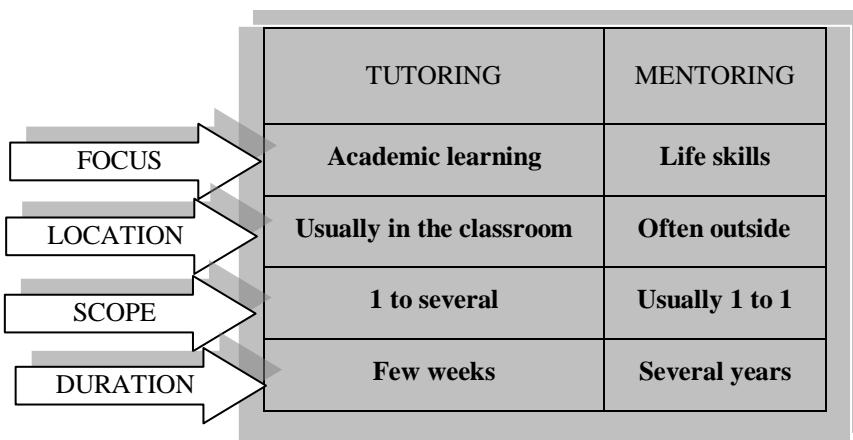


Figure 3 Differences between tutoring and mentoring

Schemes for involving students as tutors and mentors are now in place in many countries with numerous students, pupils and teachers benefiting from this activity. The main challenge is to integrate mentoring and tutoring in the basic structures of the universities. Mentoring and tutoring by students imply certain basic training in some matters as followings:

- how to start a tutoring or mentoring session by establishing a friendly atmosphere;
- familiarity with the content of the tutees' syllabus;
- what to do when the mentee/tutee gives a correct/wrong answer;
- what to do when a session goes badly;
- how to vary the content of a tutoring or mentoring session;
- how to end a tutoring or mentoring session
- record keeping

A program initiated at University of Delaware (“Mentor program matches college students with kids”) pointed out the fact that “participation in a school-based mentoring program led to improvements in students' self efficacy, aspirations and ideas of what they

could be - their possible selves. Kids get help from trained tutors and mentors; college students contribute to schools and the community in a meaningful way" (Lee & Cramond, 1997).

In addition, the mentoring programs during some work activities proved out to be very efficient for young people. For instance "Cornell Youth Apprenticeship Demonstration Project" – which emphasizes opportunities for youth to learn at work, begins in students' junior year of high school and involves workplace teaching, advising and mentoring. Students can obtain a number of credits and a formal certification on course completion.

Another framework in which mentoring appears as having successful practice experiences in many countries is in the HE field (see Frierson, 1997; Fullerton, 1996, 1998). The programs applied in this field show that the role of the mentor is extremely complex, by acting as:

- Model (the mentor inspires);
- Acculturative factor (the mentor helps others to integrate in a culture);
- Sponsor (the mentor uses his resources in order to help the one who is being protected);
- Supporter (the mentor stands beside the mentee, offers opportunities);
- Educator (the mentor encourages reflection and putting theory into practice, creates opportunities so that the protégée attains his/her learning goals).

Projects like those implemented within the SSS programs of the Universities of Cambridge and Chelmsford (entitled "Employer Mentoring Scheme") pointed out the positive effects of the relationship developed between mentors and mentees. "This Anglia Ruskin University Scheme matches second year students with employees from local companies. The employees act as 'Business Mentors' providing a career related voice of experience for the student. The Scheme is designed to assist students in improving their employability through developing workplace skills and business awareness" (ANET online community, 2005)

A new setting for the mentoring practices, as developed in the recent years, is the electronic environment. "It appears that online mentoring offers important opportunities that are not afforded by exclusively face-to-face mentoring, while presenting several practical and ethical challenges" (Rhodes et al., 2006).

4. Mentoring as educational partnership: a model, an experiment and discussions

The mentoring concept (seen by many authors as having its roots in the well-known "Odyssey" of Homer) acquires today new valences, revealing a new philosophy that emerged around the relationship Mentor-Mentee/Protégé (M-P) which must develop and manage on a partnership basis.

By adopting this philosophy, Chip Bell in his book "Managers as mentors" (Bell, 2008) proposed a mentoring model (SAGE) based on idea that a partnership for learning that enables quality education requires four core competencies as follows:

(1) Surrendering, meaning that mentor must want give up to his formal authority and control over the learning process in order to reduce protégé anxiety and enhance his courage.

(2) Accepting, meaning that mentor must recognize not only the value of the learner (protégé) but also the value of building foundation on which the partnership will develop. It is the act of inclusion, of creating a safe climate for learning so as the learner to want take risks.

(3) Gifting, meaning that mentor must give those most precious gifts possible (advice, feedback, focus, balance, explicative stories, passionate connections and so on), without expecting anything in turn (the act of generosity).

(4) Extending, meaning an extension of the M-P relationship beyond its expected boundaries to the point of releasing the learner (*protégé*) from protective wing of mentor, which is seen rather as a partner than as an educator.

A key part of such an educational partnership is the effective detection of priority needs of mentee/*protégé*. The four basic needs are the need for achievement, the need for recognition, the need for power, and the need for control (as revealed in the renowned research conducted by David McClelland of Harvard). Furthermore in such an M-P partnership relationship, the two parts may have common needs, but with a different relative importance. The "art" of mentoring is to combine them into a scheme of effective working together while maintaining the focus on learner discovery and independence. For this, Bell considers as being crucial the following qualities: balance, truth, trust, abundance, passion, and courage (Bell, 2008).

Thus, the assessment of personal attributes of the potential participants in a mentoring relationship may provide useful information about their availability and capability to involve in building a successful partnership for learning. According to Bell, the Mentor Scale (MS) is an adequate tool for such an assessment, used to measure at one point in time a mentor's need for sociability, dominance, and openness, three generic issues related to significant personal attributes and skills including those above-mentioned. In simple terms, MS is a self-checking test of the potential of mentoring that aims not to judge or criticize the person (there are no right or wrong answers) but to take "a snapshot" of its mentoring qualities, or weaknesses (Bell, 2008).

Considering all the aspects presented up to this point of the paper, we initiated a small-scale experiment (at the level of university department/year of study) in order to explore the mentoring potential by using MS. The experiment consisted of the following: (1) applying the MS test to teachers; (2) applying the MS test to students; (3) interpreting the results and comparative analysis.

In the figure 4, we present a synthesis of the main findings of our experiment.

For discussing the results relative to the attributes/skills interpreted as enablers of a successful M-P relationship (according to MS), firstly we focus on the issues of sociability and openness.

Sociability: 77% of the teachers and respective 70% of students tend to be sociable, to easily interact and create new relationships.

Openness: 66% of teachers and 80% of students tend to be honest people showing their feelings easily, having the willingness to share their knowledge and experiences, looking to be trustworthy persons able to imply in building a M-P relationship on a mutual basis.

It is noticed the strong correlation between the attributes of sociability and openness both in the case of teachers and students. Thus, most of them (representing a significant percentage of 66% for teachers and 70% for students) seem to be at the same time sociable and opened people.

As concerns the attributes of dominance, the results are somewhat different, showing an almost equal distribution between those who tend to dominate and those who tend to be dominated. However, a greater percentage of subjects have scores showing a relative balance between the two tendencies (55% of teachers and 60% of students). This confirms and Bell's opinion that today, the entire concept of education is based on a relationship of shared authority (Bell, 2008) and extremely important is to find suitable "dosage" for an effective partnership.

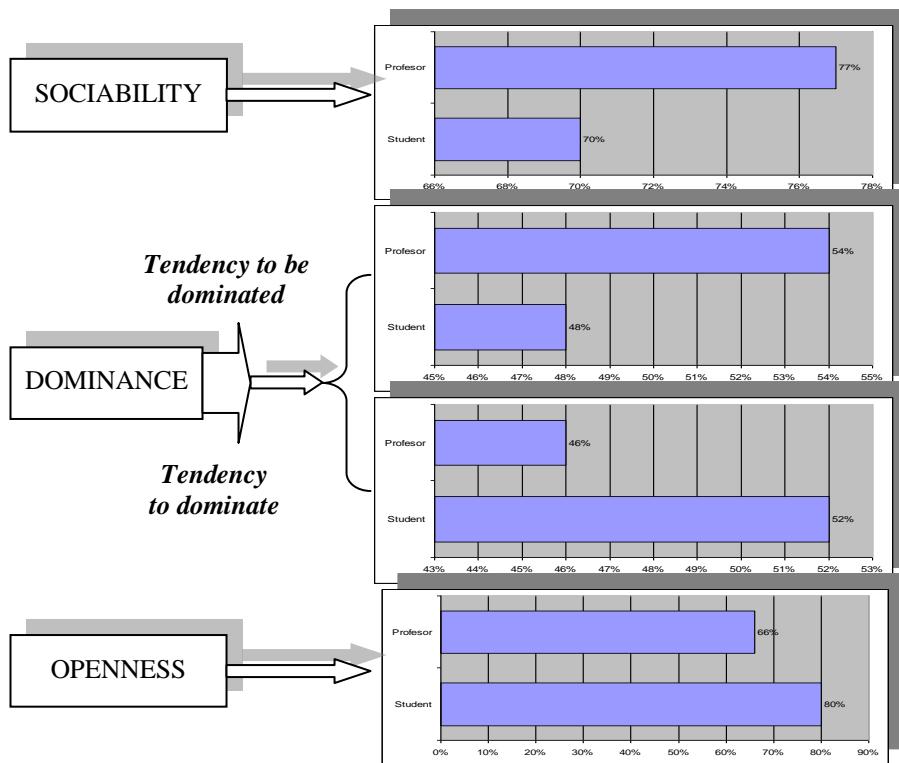


Figure 4

For that reason we consider significant the relative homogeneity of responses (individual scores without extreme values for any of the attributes/skills considered by MS) suggesting a common perspective of approaching the issues in a relative balanced manner. Furthermore, around 22% of teachers and 20% of students have answers with similar scores almost of balance for all the three areas considered. They are the ones with the greater potential to sustain and develop an effective educational partnership, having personal qualities and skills showing not only their availability but also their capability to adapt to the particular conditions that make possible such a complex M-P relationship.

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